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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0843
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0717
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1293
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1938
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: IMPENDING PROVINCIAL PEOPLE'S
COUNCIL ELECTIONS - LIKELY MORE OF THE SAME

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Provincial People's Council elections are to be conducted on December 9, for the first time since the Berdimuhamedov government approved amendments to the law governing these elections in July 2007. The amendments effectively reversed provisions of a 2005 law that, at least on paper, seemed to hand over a tiny bit of authority to the provinces. Although few observers noticed the changes in July, the application of the amendments to the impending election bring into sharp focus the notion that the current leadership prefers to retain central government control over the provinces, to include local budgetary decisions, local ordinances, and of course the appointment of governors. Although the 2005 law was never applied to provincial council elections under Niyazov, it would have been surprising if he would have really allowed someone other than himself to choose provincial governors. While the December 9 election, like previous Turkmenistan elections, will not come close to approaching international standards, we will be on the lookout for any changes in the way it is handled and indications as to the degree to which the government is reforming the election process. END SUMMARY.

13. (SBU) The 2005 Law on Provincial People's Council Members' Elections, which the Niyazov administration claimed was an effort to give some decisionmaking authority to provincial governments, is providing most of the guidance for conducting the December 9 elections. Forty members in each of the provinces and in Ashgabat (NOTE: Ashgabat City is treated like a sixth province, electorally speaking. END NOTE.) will be elected to the Provincial People's Council. The members of this council, in turn, will also be part of the National People's Council, which is also composed of District People's Councilmen, Village Councilmen, respected elders, and representatives from the provincial governorates. The new members of the Provincial People's Councils are responsible for electing their own council chairman through an open election. Their term of office is four years, and they meet at least twice a year, according to the Constitution and the 2005 law.

¶4. (SBU) In July 2007, however, following President Berdimuhamedov's entry into office, the government approved several new amendments to the 2005 law that reduced some of the limited powers of the Provincial People's Councils. For example, the 2005 law stated that the member elected to chair the Provincial People's Council would also be the provincial governor, which would have permitted, for the first time, the election of governors, albeit very indirectly. (COMMENT: Despite the 2005 law permitting provincial people's councils to choose governors, it would have been surprising if Niyazov had allowed anyone other than himself to have the last word on who served as provincial governor. END COMMENT.) In July, this language was omitted, likely in order to guarantee the President's control over the hiring and firing of provincial governors.

¶5. (SBU) Likewise, the 2005 law would have allowed provincial governments, for the first time, to pass decrees relevant to their own provinces, but this authority was not wide-ranging in this highly centralized state. The July amendments further minimized their power, stating that the decrees of provincial People's Councils would be advisory in nature only. Additionally, the 2005 law would have given provincial councils the power to approve the local budget and to control its implementation. The July amendment reduced the provincial council's role in local budgetary issues to that of discussing the budget, helping to implement it, and listening to the central government's report on implementation. All three of these changes to the law have the combined effect of assuring strong central government control over provincial affairs. (COMMENT: Trimming back the role provinces play in their own budgets may also be a way of

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controlling corruption and having a better handle of where public money goes, something Berdimuhamedov is trying to do with central government bodies. END COMMENT.)

¶6. (SBU) These elections will be the first one conducted in Turkmenistan since the presidential election of February 2007. In the past, most citizens that Post queried on the street during elections for village and district-level councilmen were uninterested in the process, did not feel it affected their lives, and were completely unfamiliar with the candidates who were running for office or their "platforms." Local election commissions, however, are responsible for informing the public about candidates. Candidates can be nominated by Turkmenistan's one political party, government-affiliated public associations or groups of private citizens. If, however, private citizens wanted to nominate a candidate, the nomination would only be valid if 200 citizens were in attendance and more than half of them approved the nomination. (That said, post knows of several cases where individuals not associated either with the party or with government-affiliated public associations in fact were nominated and were "elected" as council people.) Election commissions themselves are an issue, given that at all levels, their members are nominated by the political party and other government-controlled entities and associations. There is little by way of campaigning. The elections do not meet OSCE standards for free, fair, and transparent.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Post is expecting little on December 9, particularly given the limited powers the newly-elected provincial leaders will wield. Nonetheless, we will be on the lookout for any changes in the way this election is handled and indications as to the degree to which the government is reforming the election process.

¶8. (SBU) In meetings with Turkmenistan officials regarding the December 9 election, the U.S. government should stress:

-- The United States hopes the December 9 election will be open, transparent, and reflect procedural improvement from

the February presidential election.

-- Citizens should continue to be given increasing input into the nomination of candidates.

-- The United States hopes that election commissions at all levels will become increasingly active in informing voters of issues and platforms ahead of time and in encouraging voluntary voter turnout. However, the government should recognize that demands for near-total voter participation put unrealistic pressures on election commission officials, leading to problematic practices such as allowing heads of household to vote for all eligible family members and inappropriate use of the traveling ballot box system. As the government seeks to transform its election system so it is more consistent with international standards, it should emphasize full compliance with voting regulations over voter turnout rates.

-- The United States also encourages the government to continue to work closely with the UNDP, OSCE and other respected entities to identify and address areas not consistent with international standards. In particular, the government should respond to the proposal ODIHR submitted in October, at Turkmenistan government request, on electoral reform.

-- The United States also urges Turkmenistan to seek "cooperation" with election-oriented non-governmental organizations so that the electoral process can reach a stage where Turkmenistan can then invite international observers to monitor elections. END COMMENT.

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